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Highlights of Fairbury fair's 1st century

(Editor's Note - • Bill Fugate spent several days recently researching the tiles of The Fairbury Blade and Its predecessors. The Independent Blade, the Independent. and The Journal, to capture the highlights of the Fairbury Fair's First Century for a speech to Rotary club. The following is adapted from that speech.

In 1840, there were 759 people in all of Livingston county, which has the fourth largest area in the state; in 20 years it had grown to 11,637, and by 1870 to 31,471.

In 1862, Fairbury, which had been laid out in 1357, had its first coal mine, and two years later, in 1864 it was incorporated. In 1866 it had the first of what for a painful few years (common to the state), was a profusion of newspapers.

The first here was the Journal, started in 1866, and by 1876 several had come and gone, but The Blade was firmly entrenched and ready to look after the fair, year for year, when the ambitious citizens of the area decided in 1876, to launch the Fairbury Union Agricultural Exposition. Remember that in that year, there were no telephones, no electric lights (and no night entertainment at the fair); no central heating plants, no paved roads, and the only Flying Machine heard of was that of the fictional Darius Greene.

According to The Blade "The Fairbury people are tired of Pontiac having their own fair, so The Fairbury Union Agricultural Board was incorporated under legislative act in 1876."

On Jan. 19, the first officers were John Virgin (a horse importer) president; John S. Steers, vice-president; C.C. Bartlett, treasurer; and Smith Olney, secretary. Other directors were Jacob B. Bally, Stephen Herr, Henry Kingman, John F. Myers, Henry Skinner, George Myers, Robert Elmore, J.H. Earnhart, Owen Finnegan, D.L. Murdock, R.E. Norman, D.R. Potter and Benjamin Curnpston.

Emery Gregg was the marshal, assisted by W.L. Bailey; and R.C. Straight was the stall agent.

James Cook was named general superintendent of the Floral Hall.

Department superintendents were E.W. Mahoney, cattle; John Morris, horses; Samuel Morrison, sheep; William Younger, swine; H.B. Watson, poultry; T.T. Babcock, speed; D.S. Crum, farming implements; O.S. Westervelt, horticulture; Robert Montgomery, sewing machines; George Warrick, farm products; Mrs. T.A. Jones, canned and preserved fruits; Mrs. C.B. Alford, paintings and drawings; Mrs. Smith Olney, floral; Mrs. H. Remington, household fabrics; Mrs. R.G. Crouch, kitchen and dairy; Miss M.A. McDowell, textile fabrics; William Casey, unremunerated articles; and W. N. Combs, work in leather.

That first fair book, of which we have a copy courtesy of Dick Anderson of Fairbury. goes on to say that "Whereas the farmers and mechanics of this portion of the state deem this point the best opening for a great Union Fair, and having a desire to elevate their profession, and excite in each other a spirit of emulation and rivalry, we, therefore do hereby form ourselves into an Agricultural and Mechanical Association with its central point in Fairbury."

They raised $6,000 by selling 240 shares at $25 each, and the same 21 acres of land on which the fair stands today were purchased at an aggregate cost of $2,800.

By 1878, the grounds were well improved and enclosed with an eight-foot board fence, and had large and commodious buildings.

That first year, the fair offered "Class F, Trotting, T.T. Babcock, superintendent. Fastest trotter in harness, mile heats, best three in five, three or more to enter, two to start." First premium was $125; second, $50, and third was $25. Entry fee was 10% of the purse, or $20. They also had a race for four year olds, half mile, two out of three heats; and the same for three year old trotters, with both races paying $25 for first money, $15 and $10 for second and third, and entry fees of $5 for the four year olds, and none for three year olds.

But perhaps the most unique aspect of that first fair was its emphasis not only on better breeding stock in the livestock world, but also on the mechanical side.

This was the age of the blacksmith and the tinkerer and the inventor.

That first Fairbury fair offered classes for the best sod plow, the best sub-soil plow, old ground plow, gang plow, trench plow, corn plow, single-shovel plow, double-shovel plow, two horse cultivator, walking; two-horse cultivator, riding; corn planter, harrow, hay pitchfork, field roller, broadcast sower, horse rake;

Best corn shelter, both horse and hand-power; fanning mill, hay and straw stacker, feed grinder, self-raking reaper, single mower, bee hive, churn, clothes wringer, clothes dryer (and they didn't mean gas or electric), cheese press, coal cooking stove, coal parlor stove, washing machine, combined reaper and mower;

Threshing machine, grain binder, portable hay press, corn gatherer, under-draining machine, underground drain tile; farm gate, road scraper, hedge trimmer, post auger, lifting pump, forcing pump, wind pump, corn basket, fruit basket, two-horse carriage, two horse wagon, one-horse top buggy, one-horse open buggy; cider mill and fence for farm purposes.

That last class is important, for you must remember that this was just at the time that the great barb-wire "explosion" and patent race was taking place just 100 miles or so north of us at DeKalb, between 1874 and 1878.

The item judged best in each of the above categories was awarded "The Diploma of The Board" which in those times was useful in advertising if the product was to be marketed. In fact, we have an example of that today in the brand name of a popular beer, Pabst Blue Ribbon, which drew its name from a premium award.

As for sewing machines, the premium book said "A Diploma from a committee, to be selected by the agents exhibiting machines, will be awarded to the best machine."

And to show they came to stay, that first board of directors offered Class Q, Shade Trees. "Best shade trees, to be paid for at fair for 1877. For 6 best planted and growing, set in spring or autumn, on fair ground, as directed by superintendent of our fair ground. First premium $25, 2nd, $15 and 3rd, $10."

The inauguration of The Fairbury Fair caused sparks in Pontiac, and the newspaper there referred to the planned Fairbury event as a "a pumpkin fair." The next year, when Pontiac was to hold their 20th fair, while Fairbury was preparing for only its second, the Pontiac newspaper alluded to the fact that we were so audacious as to call ours a county fair.

The Blade retorted that "Our fair is open to the world.

"Compared to our World's Fair, it (Pontiac) will be absolutely nowhere."

Meanwhile, in preparation for the fair, Fairbury launched a cleanup effort. Privies were painted, manure was hauled from barn lots, trash was removed, and even the town jail was cleaned.

As fair week dawned, The Blade reported that "Livestock is being driven into town for exhibition; race horses are coming, with water buckets and blankets tied under their sulkies. Drays are waiting at the railroad station to bring the carnival, and the side shows "will include a snake charmer, a snake eater, cane men, balloon men, whip men and a fortune teller.

A "dance show, with the wholly exposed female form in dance posture, multiplied by mirrors, was run out of town by the church ladies."

The steam operated merry-go-round had a hand-cranked organ for music, and when the boiler suffered a breakdown, a local blacksmith got it back in operation in a few hours.

Most fairgoers from out of town came by wagon, there were only about a half-dozen carriages in evidence, and most brought their dinners with them. They unhitched, tied their horses to the wagon, and used the wagon box for a feed trough when it came the horses' turn.

It rained the first night, and turned the- fairgrounds to mud. Notwithstanding, the first fair was a success, and for the second one, in 1877, an Old Settler's Day was planned, to honor those who had lived here at least 15 years.

That first fair attracted 1,400 entries, and all premiums were paid in cash, with no pro-rate deduction, which was the case in many fairs where they lacked enough to pay off.

And the floral hall exhibition included a patented wood fly trap!

For 1877, the Fair board advertised for several weeks in The Blade that "Not withstanding the depressing influence of the times, consequent upon the partial failure of crops in this vicinity for three years previous, and almost entire failure last year, the inclemency of the weather during the time of holding our first fair last fall, it met with a great success, both financially and otherwise, equaled by few and surpassed by none of the county fairs in the state."

In those days, they took fair entries when they saw them, and so many showed up the second year that the entry deadline was extended to the second day in order to get them all recorded. They totaled 1,727, an increase of 300 over the first year, and among them were 370 horses, 105 cattle, 27 sheep and 120 hogs, as well as 118 poultry, 130 dairy products, 125 textile and 63 fabrics. There were 60 farm implements, 3 sewing machines, two shade trees, 252 canned goods, 117 fruits and vegetables and 27 paintings, plus 100 unremunerated.

On several of the days, they had 7,000 people, and on one of them, a certain Brick Pomeroy was to speak on two topics "How to keep out of the poor house," and "What I know about farming."

But Pomeroy didn't show up, having missed his train at Pontiac. While great disappointment war "being expressed by the Multitudes", the officers learned of the problem by telegraph. They chartered a train at Pontiac, brought Pomeroy to Fairbury, arriving here by 5 p.m., where he then delivered what The Blade called "a good speech."

Talk of the 1878 fair was the phonograph. It cost 10c to hear "this wonderful machine which talks, plays the cornet, sings and laughs."

Hans Schuler of Colfax gave Lincoln's Gettysburg address, and for the best drilled military company, the Fair paid $50 and a silk flag for first, and $15 and a bunting flag for second. Capt. Joe Scibird, mayor of Fairbury and editor of The Blade, presented his Zouave cadets, a youthful drill corps which used wooden guns.

That same year the fair offered $25 for the best baseball club, and the tournament was halted in the fourth inning of the finals when a dispute arose between Fairbury and Forrest over an umpire's decision and play was not resumed.

In 1879, fair entries had risen to 2,294, and John Virgin, the horse importer and fair president, was advertising that "no class of property, real or personal, depreciates so little as a horse."

By 1883, they were paying $4,000 in premiums (this year it's $66,000); and The Blade wrote "Look out for a gang of robbers who will follow the show here today. Keep your house well secured as a worse gang of toughs probably was never gathered together!" Walton's were exhibiting parlor and bed- room furniture; while Merit and Sons were showing boots and shoes.

In 1884 The Blade began the publication of a free daily newspaper during the fair, a tradition that continued for several years. featured Fairbury's own Carl Goody, who for years was the world champion in this sport.

By 1901, the Fair was in its 25th year, and Frank James, the reformed desperado, was here as starter for the horse races. The next year, the hottest items on the grounds were two newly developed grain dumps. A year later, a baby was born on the fairgrounds to the wild animal trainer and his wife, and she was christened Essie Fairbury Sanders.

In 1916, Newt Fulton, fair Secretary and by then the editor of The Blade, launched the promotion of auto races, and secured the appearance of Eddie Rickenbacker, who was to gain later fame as an aviator and hero of two wars.

Then came the motorcycle races which featured Fairbury's own Carl Goudy, who for years was the world champion in this sport.

The quarter mile track was built in 1946, and in 1947, 5,300 paid admission to see the 50-lap feature on it.

At the 1923 fair, there was a scarcity of corn due to the backward season, DeBold House-holder won the early potato class, Raymond Tavener had the champion big club swine litter, and Helen Garber, now Helen Bennett, had the first place girls divinity candy, while "Little" Carlos Thompson showed Barred Plymouth Rock chickens, winning firsts for hen, and pen, and second place for cockerel; he also won the 8th grade writing contest and the 8th grade wood working class.

During that fair week, Alexander's bakery sold 37,861 buns and 652 pies, and Mayor Joseph Gerber warned against spitting on the sidewalk.

By 1925, Pontiac had buried the hatchet, and lauded Fairbury and The Blade on publication of the Golden Jubilee Fair issue, calling it "a laudable effort."

That year the two-time world's champion horse shoe pitcher, Frank Johnson, set a new world's record here, making 80 out of a possible 100 ringers, and 31 of them were double ringers.

The 1926 fair offered the first of a long series of Society Horse shows, drawing nationally known names, and also launched the Better Babies Conference.

After the fair fell into financial difficulties during the depression of the 1930s, a reorganization failed, and the fair missed a year.

Then John Joda Post 54 of The American Legion, in 1936, took over the mortgage from the small group chartered as the Indian Grove Fair association, which had succeeded the Fairbury Union Agricultural association, paying them $6,300, after borrowing $4,000 from the bank. Three years later they got a new charter, as The Fairbury Fair, and in 1941 they paid back their bank loan in full.

In the ensuing 35 years, the fair has developed its 10-week summer auto racing program, upgraded the horse racing program, and sought new ways to attract spectators who in that time have become more sophisticated in their entertainment tastes, and more mobile in their recreation.

Today, we still have car races and horse races, plus tractor pulls, a shift to later week programming, Wednesday through Sunday, a marching band contest, Loretta Lynn, the Queen of Country Music, and a flea market, selling things that were popular when the Fair was only half as old, or even younger. And so we complete our first century, and set our eyes on the next 100 years.

Fairbury Fair Golden Jubilee Edition
Price $2.00 Per Year.
SOME EARLY SKETCHES OF FAIRBURY AND THE FAIR

"Backward, Turn Backward, 0 Time in Thy Flight!" (By N. E. Fulton)

When one's thoughts are turned backward over a period of fifty years or more, long forgotten pictures appear on memory's screen of life. Dim and indistinct in the earlier periods but as the focus shortens by years of childhood to youth the pictures become sharp and defined. Faces, incidents and scenes go through the mind, not always in regular sequence; years of the past will hop over years of the future and make a jumble of dates of events to be straightened out by a mind more methodical and less liable , to err.

The chief aim of this story is to give the present generation an idea of the early days of Fairbury and a sketchy history of the Fairbury Fair. If there are mixed dates or omissions we will here and now plead ignorance for the first and your pardon for the second. In taking a moving picture one camera man will take the picture from one angle and another from another angle and when the two reels are developed the pictures, while containing the same characteristics and scenery, will look altogether different.

There were, perhaps, two or three hundred youthful minds taking reels of pictures of Fairbury at the same time the reel about to be shown was taken and probably no two of them are alike. Therefore, please temper your judgment with mercy when you pick out the flaws.

If you can, just imagine a town which was being built upon a very swampy piece of land. The more you can imagine swamp the more natural the picture of early Fairbury. There were board walks all over town where there were any houses and most of the walks in the center of the city were up on stilts from three to four feet. There was no drainage except two open ditches, one along the railroad track and one along Ash street.

When it rained hard the sidewalks floated around town until the flood subsided, then they were re-anchored. The "kids" had great times those days boat riding.

To give a correct idea of general conditions at the opening of the fair it is well to tell of a few conveniences the people did not have for the reason they were not in existence. There were no wires in the town as telephones and electric lights were un-dreamed-of. The only flying machine known to the children of that period was that of Darius Green and that wasn't very much of a success. There were few cellars and those that were under houses had a habit of filling up with water to the floor of the house three or four times a year.

The first heating plants were put in ten years later and until that time everyone had stoves which were moved out in the spring and put back in the fall. The men and boys all wore boots, some kid, some cow hide. The women wore bustles and dresses with tails. Their hair was their crowning glory.

We move to the next block west. There in the window of the corner
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EARLY SKETCHES OF THE FAIR
(Continued from Page 1)

building is another familiar face. I: is Gus Mundt. He doesn't wear a mustache now but his old friends would recognize him. Just starting up the stairway is Smith Olney. with Squire Shepherd just behind.

The next place is Frank Franzen's and the next Pete & Louie's. Then there is Joe Rettenmeyer's. The next building is occupied by J. F. Blackburn & Co., the "Co." being John Zimmerman. If you look closely inside you will see a youth with long hair and short pants sweeping out the store. That would be Phil Wade.

The picture moves on down the line west showing the Odd Fellows' hall, the Masonic hall, Joy's furniture store, Patrick Moran's place, O'Malley Bros. place, Stillwell's shoe store, the T. A. Beach building with Squire Hanna its occupant, the Bartlett, Beach & Dominy Bank, then the post office on the corner with Hiel Ramsey in the front part with a news stand.

Oh. yes, D. L. Murdock has his law office in the Beach building. The picture moves to the next block west. All frame buildings. A. H. Remington's grocery store on the corner, and there in Moin Baiy, clerk, and Merritt VanOver, delivery boy.

Then comes Miss "Tat," Sackett's millinery store, James Wade's livery stable, A. W. Streeper's shoe shop, Squire Ross' office, the Central House located about where the Babcock and Keck buildings stand, and father down on the corner is Earnheart & Baker's implement store.

All are frame buildings in the next block except one, and several vacant lots. The first building is occupied by Tresize, the photographer; one or two vacant buildings; Mrs. Zane's millinery store; Dave Wright's meat shop; Mrs. Decker's millinery store; brick building occupied by Stonehawker & Weaver with a clothing store; then Walton's store on the corner facing west on the square. Across the street south from this is Ben Walton's flour mill. North of Walton's store are two frame buildings, one occupied by Dr. Kimball with a drug store. On the north side facing the square are a number of imposing two-story brick buildings.

The one on the east is 0. P. McDowell's hall with Pogue's dry goods store and 0. P. McDowell's hardware store occupying the lower floor. The next building is the First National Bank of I. P. McDowell with Taylor & Weaver's loan office upstairs. The next building was occupied by Westervelt & Gravina with a grocery store, then H. L. Bruce's furniture store.

Doesn't he look fine with his red sash, big black mustache and high boots? Right behind him is his assistant. Well, if it isn't Moin Baily and he is going to announce the prize winners because he has a voice that can be heard out in Potosi Corners.

Here are Mr. and Mrs. Benjamin Cumpston and family. He has charge of the floral hall. Here come some of the band. There is Alf Powley, Sam Greenebaum, Lafe Kring, Alf Jones, Harry Armstrong, Zack Hanna, Cy Fawlkner, John Seeders, Cy Tarlton and Louis Bechtold. Here, walking on the new sidewalk are Mr. and Mrs. Frank Franzen and George and Casper.

My! Look at the stream of wagons now; they are lined up almost to Main street. There is Bob Elmore and his family from Forrest; Stephen Herr and wife of Chatsworth. There is Henry Skinner and family; there is Owen Finnegan and George Myers and their families.

Here is a carriage! It is Mr. and Mrs. L. B. Dominy and . family. Look at them coming on the board walk! Mr. and Mrs. Henry I Kingman, Mr. and Mrs. J. F. Earnheart, Mr. and Mrs. D. L. Murdock, all with their families. There is J. W. Baily, M. H. Baily and his wife, Jesse Baily and Dick Baily. There is W. E. • Norman and family. We can't any • more than name them as they go by and may miss some of them even then.

Mr. and Mrs. T. A. Beach and daughter in a carriage; and here come the doctors, Dr. N. T. P. Robinson and his family, Dr. S. P. Kimball, Dr. McConnell and wife and daughter, Dr. D. Brewer, Dr. Frank Brewer, Dr. J. B. Fulton and family. Just look at the whiskers on the medical fraternity.

And there is Dr. Fraley and wife and son Al. There is A .F. Filley and family. Here comes James McDowell and family with Lee and John Will from the farm. There goes William I Hackett and family.

Here comes John L. Marsh and wife and Lizzie Noise. There is H. L. Marsh and Carrie and John and Miss Knox. That is Mr. and Mrs. A. B. Fulton and son. There comes Wallace Amsbary and wife and all the children.

Here is George Scriven and Ed Anable. Well. if there isn't Dave Rogers and Jim E Hendricks and Jack Morrison; and who is that with them? Why, that is Dr. Rayburn, the new dentist. Aren't they the dudes of the town?

And who I is that little lame darky with a shoe shining box over his shoulder? Nobody but Dick, that everyone knows. Here come the Kirkwood and Hotchkiss families and James Gibb, who runs the east mine and his family and there are Mr. and Mrs. Tom Scouler and family.

Here comes a line of wagons from the country: Mr. and Mrs. William Fugate and family, Mr. and Mrs. Hugh McKee and family, Sam Mecord and family, Philip Goembel and family, Adam Kessler and family, Phil Fisher and family. Arlington Foster and family, Jap Morris and family, Bryan Judd and family, John McGreal and family.

Thomas Moran and family, Josiah Yoe and family. John Harris and family, Captain Baird and family, William Nimmo and family. John and Louis Sorg. A. N. Zane and family. William and Orlando Smith. William Mahanna and family. Mr. and Mrs. Oxley and Harry and Sam. John Kelso and family.

Wilson Kelso and family. John Bennett and family. John Masters and family. Zera Town and family. Warren Town and family. Edward Shaw and family. Fred Metz and wife and eighteen children all on a family ticket. Mike Meenan and family. Bloom family, Joseph Brown and family, B. W. Danforth and family, Joe and Fred Householder and families, Jacob Becktold and family, Jesse Raridon and family. Stewart Raridon and family, Alexander Martin and family,

Dr. C. B. Ostrander and wife, Dr. Johnson and family. Frank Mowry and family, Wm. Seeders and family. Captain Morris and family, Mack Wright and family, S. D. Duell and family. George Lynn and family, Mr. and Mrs. L. J. Lough, Jonas Lough and family, T. A. McKenzie and family, George Cottingham and family, William Martin and family, Joe Martin and family, John Martin and family, Robert Martin and family, Louis Cottingham, Anthony Bennett's family (he is tending gate), William Bricker and family, Uncle Tommy McDowell and family,

Richard Fry and family. Mr. and Mrs. W. D. Fry, Martin Darnall, Jeff Donoho and wife, George Fry and wife, Mr. and Mrs. Ben Barnes, Mr. and Mrs. Dave Barnes, Mr. and Mrs. John Zimmerman, Mr. and Mrs. J. F. Blackburn, Mr. and Mrs. I. P. McDowell and family, Mr. and Mrs. O. P. McDowell and family, Judge McDowell and family, James Langabeer and family, Mr. and Mrs. William VanDoorn, Will and Frank, Emory Westervelt, Emory and George. 0. J. Dimmick and family and L. W. Dimmick, Mr. and Mrs. L. S. Carter and family. T. F. Ramsey and family,

H. J. Ramsey. Sam Ramsey. Ben Hieronymous, Elias Virgin, James Boyd and John Woods, the Wallace families, Mr. and Mrs. T. G. Henderson, the Bryant family. Mr. and Mrs. Isaac Walton, J. W. Walton, William Cumpston and family, Sol Baker and family. A. M. Burch and family, William Van Wormer, Uncle John McDowell and family, Sam Greenebaum and family, 0. F. Avery and family. Hugh Stafford and family, W. T. Stafford and family, Gilbert Evans and family, John Hutson and family, Jesse Titus and family.

James Beadle and family, Joseph Shover and family, Mr. and Mrs. Ferris and Ada and 0. V., W. T. Hempstead and family, W. T. Stackpole and family, Mr. and Mrs. George Worrick and family, John Skeins and family, Gus, Will and Dilla Chesebra, Demos Elliott. Nuce Bryant and family, Homer and Dell Weaver, C. B. Fleming, Mr. and Mrs. Cooley and family, Mr. and Mrs. John Wantland, Henry Lower.

Here come some from Pontiac: W. T. Ament, Sard Lawrence, James Morrow, Mr. Lyons, Wallace Lord, Judge Pillsbury, Harve Gunsel, B. E. Robinson, Richard Ross, R. C. Huntoon.

There is the merry-go-round operated by an old horse, and see the young girls in their white, starched dresses. There is Georgia, Minnie and Alta Virgin. Olive and Ruth Filley, Belle Wade, Lida Wade. Lutie McDowell, Eva McDowell, Jennie. Jessie and Lizzie Dominy, Minnie Shepherd, Carrie Marsh, Addie Bates.

Pictures Not in the Movie.

The Livingston house was located in the block west of the Arcade block on the south side of the railroad track. It was a frame building with really modern improvements. It occupied almost the full length of the block and was used as a depot as well as a hotel. It was built by John L. Marsh. Mr. Marsh also gave the "public square" where the waterworks now stands, and the west park to the city.

The Livingston house was two story with dormer windows and was operated by a man named Wence when burned, about 1878.

The fire engine house was just where the city hall now stands. It was a long sway-backed building and contained the fire apparatus, such as it was. There was a good bell, a mighty good bell, which called the people out to the fires which were almost as numerous as the days of the week.

The fire company had red helmets and trumpets and there was a lot of shouting and running around. Of course they always tried to pump the old hand pump for a few minutes and then the firemen would hold a public consultation and vote to run the old pump in the fire and burn it up, something they never did however.

You were always sure of seeing a complete fire every time the bell rang and it was worth while to get up and dress, for they were most always good ones. Jacob VonTobel and Al Coomer ran the lumber yard in the city hall block, having purchased it of John Coomer.

The Presbyterian church, a low frame building, stood just where the church now stands.

Moin Baily announced the prize winners. How he does bring out ILLINOI — and the Pontiac visitors always called Fairbury "Illinoi" after the fair.

The land for the fair ground was purchased of Dr. J. B. Fulton for $35 per acre.

Judge Carrithers helped John Virgin lay out the race track. He was a school teacher in those days.